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ABSTRACT

This article presents summaries of research on 13 core understandings about learning to read, from "Building a Knowledge Base in Reading" (Jane Braunger and Jan Patricia Lewis). In the article, each core understanding is followed by activity ideas and strategies useful for tutors--these activities were created with one-on-one tutoring in mind but can be adapted to other projects. The article outlines the following 13 core understandings: (1) Reading is a construction of meaning from written text--it is an active, cognitive, and affective process; (2) Background knowledge and prior experience are critical to the reading process; (3) Social interaction is essential to learning to read; (4) Reading and writing develop together; (5) Reading involves complex thinking; (6) Environments rich in literacy experiences, resources, and models facilitate reading development; (7) Engagement in the reading task is key in learning to read; (8) Children's understandings of print are not the same as adults' understandings; (9) Children develop phonemic awareness and knowledge of phonics through a variety of literacy opportunities, models, and demonstrations; (10) Children learn successful reading strategies in the context of real reading; (11) Children learn best when teachers--and tutors--employ a variety of strategies to model and demonstrate reading knowledge, strategy, and skills; (12) Children need the opportunity to read, read, read; and (13) Monitoring the development of reading processes is vital to student success. Includes "terms to know." (NKA)

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Putting Research to Use: Activities that Help Children Read.

by Amy Blake

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Putting Research to Use
Activities that Help Children Read

LEARNS - Linking Education and America Reads through National Service
by Amy Blake, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
The Tutor, Fall 1998 Special Supplement

How do you make sense of all the research on how children learn to read? Do you struggle to connect research with the work you do each week helping children learn to read and write? Here, you'll find summaries of research on 13 core understandings about learning to read, from *Building a Knowledge Base in Reading* by Jane Braunger and Jan Patricia Lewis. Each core understanding is followed by activity ideas and strategies you can share with your tutors. Modify them to fit your program needs, combine them with your tutors' experiences, or take them as is. No matter how you adapt this information, you'll be putting research to use!

1. ***Reading is a construction of meaning from written text. It is an active, cognitive, and affective process.***

- ***The research says:*** Reading print involves recognizing individual letters and words as well as comprehending how words work together to tell a story. To read and comprehend a story, children must be actively involved–thinking about people in the story, talking about what may happen next, looking at pictures, acting out events. By engaging in this process of reading, children develop general reading and decoding strategies (see *decode* in Terms to Know, pg. 4), build on existing vocabulary, form critical thinking skills, and improve social skills.

- ***Put it to use!*** When you read to or with a child, engage her: Ask her about pictures and how they relate to the story. Have her speculate about what will happen next and why. Ask open-ended questions that encourage her to use her imagination. Keep a list of words she knows by sight *(sight words*, pg. 4), in a reading journal. As she learns more words, add them to the list. Refer back to it periodically, and congratulate her on knowing so many words!

2. *Background knowledge and prior experience are critical to the reading process.*

- ***The research says:*** The foundations of literacy are laid early, some studies suggest before birth! But not all children get one-on-one attention or experience literacy-rich environments needed to build school success and self-confidence. Marilyn Adams, in *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print*, estimates that some children begin first grade with 1,000–1,700 hours of one-on-one picture book reading time, while others average only about 25 hours. The interaction, conversations, reading, and other activities of one-on-one tutoring give children experiences that help develop background knowledge and self-confidence necessary to become successful readers.

- ***Put it to use!*** In the first tutoring session, talk to the child about his past literacy experiences. Talk to him about other experiences, interests, and things he'd like to know more about. Even if the teacher has given you background information, having a direct conversation with the child helps build a trusting relationship. These conversations will also help you choose books and activities to use later. As one activity, have the child draw a picture of his house, showing the location of all the tools of literacy: pens, pencils, paints, grocery lists, photos, books, artwork, his own drawings on the refrigerator. Share a picture of your own.

3. *Social interaction is essential to learning to read.*

- ***The research says:*** Oral storytelling is an important part of many cultures and traditions, from passing down family history to telling ghost stories. Children's storytelling gives insight into what they think about and how they interpret events. In the context of tutoring, having conversations and participating in stories of all kinds give children chances to practice important literacy behaviors and form a significant relationship with an adult.

- ***Put it to use!*** Play "pass the story" either as an oral or writ-ten activity. You begin the story with a fantastic premise; for example: "When I awoke this morning, my bed was in the middle of a desert that stretched to the end of the earth." Pass the story to the child, who "writes" the next few sentences of the plot. Trade the story back and forth, asking questions and encouraging imaginative developments. As a group, children can act out the story using props and costumes. If your project involves service learning, conversations and storytelling provide ways of reflecting on service. Children can tell the story of their service project individually or

in groups; orally; by writing a play or skit; or in various drawing and art projects–all of which can be told, performed, or displayed for classmates, parents, and the community.

4. ***Reading and writing develop together.***

The research says: Language skills–reading, writing, speaking–develop together as children begin to understand and interpret the world. Developing readers and writers need encouragement and space to explore the possibilities of language. Many studies, including one by the National Research Council's Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, show that by supporting invented spelling, teachers, parents, and tutors can see a child's sense of phonics and how it develops. These activities were created with one-on-one tutoring in mind but can be adapted to other projects. To address the gender pronoun issue (he/she), we have chosen to alternate pronouns in each scenario.

- ***Put it to use!*** Have the child write and illustrate a story about an important older person in his life, perhaps a grandparent or caregiver. A developing writer may use pictures to stand in for parts of his story and use *invented spelling* (pg. 4). Use this as an opportunity to talk about the story: What was the grandparent's life like when she was the child's age? How do they spend time together? Alternatively, have the child dictate the story to you. Afterward, he can illustrate it. Either of these stories can be "published" as a book. Display the book in the tutoring room or classroom, or include it in a portfolio of the child's work.

5. ***Reading involves complex thinking.***

- *The research says:* Long before children can match print with sound, they use language to observe, understand, and interpret their world. Both in and out of the classroom, a child builds foundation skills that help her grow into a more sophisticated reader, writer, and thinker: writing pretend messages to a friend, discussing a book that she has read or has been read to her, singing jump-rope songs or the "A-B-C" song. In doing so, children show they already know a great deal about language and print, which they build on as they grow older.

- ***Put it to use!*** Have the child write, tell, and/or draw a sequel to her favorite book. Discuss what has already happened. Imagine together the events of a story that begins where one book ends. Explore the possibilities by asking questions that help her consider the book's past and future. "But didn't Mrs. Wishy Washy live on a farm?" or "If Old MacDonald lived in the city, what kinds of animals would he have?" This activity also allows the child to insert her own experiences into the story. Publish and prominently display the book.

6. ***Environments rich in literacy experiences, resources, and models facilitate reading development.***

- ***The research says:*** A print-rich environment is filled with lots of books and provides many opportunities to engage in reading and other literacy activities. It's a place where a child can see and participate in reading, writing, telling stories, drawing. And remember, no matter where you go, there are always "texts" to read (a restaurant menu) and stories to tell (how that lone tree got left at the top of the hill).

- ***Put it to use!*** Create a literacy wall in your tutoring area. Post the children's written work–everything from illustrated stories to poems and pictures cut or copied from magazines or books. Hang blank paper and provide crayons, colored pencils, or markers so everyone can draw pictures, jot down thoughts, and leave each other notes. (Be sure your markers don't bleed through.) Fill shelves with appealing and fun books, magazines, and props children can use to act out stories (*dramatic play*, pg. 4). Include books, pictures, and art that reflect the diversity of the children's homes, school, and community. To encourage a literacy-rich environment at home, create a book bin with many kinds and levels of books. Children can check one out overnight or for several days. If your program or school is short on resources, talk to your local library, book and art stores, thrift stores, and other organizations that can donate supplies. Consider forming a partnership with a local business that can donate books or money and have the contribution recognized with a book plate.

7. ***Engagement in the reading task is key in successfully learning to read.***

- ***The research says:*** Skills-based instruction stresses letter recognition and phonics. Literature-based instruction emphasizes reading and understanding stories, and teaches specific skills alongside story comprehension. In a study by Penny Freppon, a group of second-graders who entered a class that taught foundation skills separate from comprehension lost literate behaviors they had previously formed. They developed patterns of passivity and were less likely to pursue reading and writing on their own. A second group who entered a literature-based class continued to read and write on their own and showed enjoyment and confidence in their abilities as readers and writers.

- ***Put it to use!*** Do you tutor a child for whom English is a second language? Talk to her about her family's customs. Encourage her to share pictures, books, art, or clothing that play a part in her culture and its traditions. What meaning do these items have? When are they used? Check out from the school or local library relevant books you can read together. Ask her to teach you a few words in her first language, such as general greetings or words that you use together often (names of animals or places in a favorite book). For any child, books and activities that fit her interests build motivation to read and reinforce the enjoyment she finds in reading.

8. ***Children's understandings of print are not the same as adults' understandings.***

- ***The research says:*** As adults, we have internalized the mechanics of how print works and what books do–from punctuation and letters to textual meaning and purpose. For children, the rules and conventions of print are new and often confusing. The challenge for a teacher, tutor, or parent is to teach the rules while keeping open the magical worlds of books.

- ***Put it to use!*** In the forthcoming *Learning to Read and Write: A Place to Start*, Rebecca Novick suggests strategies to help a child think about letters, sounds, and words in print. The strategies listed below help teach letter-based knowledge; using them in conjunction with larger discussions about a book helps a child learn the rules by understanding a story.

- Point to a letter and say the individual sound.

- Look for a known part or small word to get at a bigger word (like *at* in *bat*)?

- Substitute a word that makes sense. Can *run* replace *walk*?

- Predict what may come next in a story.

- Write words the child doesn't know on Post-it ® notes or scraps of paper. Post them on the literacy wall, and practice them during later sessions.

- Model your own thinking process out loud as you pronounce words or use pictures to understand a story.

9. ***Children develop phonemic awareness and knowledge of phonics through a variety of literacy opportunities, models, and demonstrations.***

- ***The research says:*** Children's *phonemic awareness* (awareness of separate sounds in words-pg. 4) is encouraged through reading and rereading nursery rhymes, singing songs with rhyme and alliteration, enjoying tongue twisters, and paying attention to the movement of the mouth as sounds are made. Phonemic awareness develops naturally when reading books with rhymes, alliteration, and rhythm. The repetition and pleasure of saying and listening to rhymes, poems, and songs expand vocabulary and foster creativity and playfulness with language.

- ***Put it to use!*** Keep several books of poetry in your book bin. When you read a book of poetry together, talk about a poem's meaning, what it makes the child think of, and how it sounds and looks. Magnetic Poetry ® kits for kids are sold at most bookstores and novelty stores-single words are printed in black on big, white magnets so that children can easily arrange words, play with ideas, and create poems. Create your own poetry kit by writing single words on pieces of paper big enough for a child to read and handle. Collect 20, 50, 100 words in a hat, box, or bowl. Have her choose 10 words, more or less, and make a poem with them. Transcribe and post it. *Beyond Words: Writing Poems with Children* by Elizabeth McKim and Judith W. Stenbergh, contains lists of words that you can photocopy and cut for a (nearly) ready-made word bowl.

10. ***Children learn successful reading strategies in the context of real reading.***

- ***The research says:*** Children learn strategies to decode words, anticipate what will happen next, understand an entire story, and begin to apply these strategies to other reading situations through the context of "real reading." Learning the alphabet and beginning to print words are skills that provide the foundation of reading success. These skills are most effective when learned and practiced in the context of reading a book and understanding a story.

- ***Put it to use!*** Inventory the opportunities to read and write in the classroom or in a room at home. Have the child write down or recall all the "texts" in his kitchen: grocery list, calendar, newspaper, take-out menus, crossword puzzles. Inventory your own home or what you see on the way to the school: street signs, billboards, someone reading a book. Encourage the child to perform "real reading" wherever he goes, looking for texts and understanding their meaning.

11. *Children learn best when teachers [and tutors] employ a variety of strategies to model and demonstrate reading knowledge, strategy, and skills.*

- ***The research says:*** Both children and adults learn in different ways. Some of us learn best when we hear or write down information, and others need hands-on experience to grasp concepts and remember facts. In *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* and subsequent writings, psychologist Howard Gardner identifies at least seven ways that people are smart (see *multiple intelligences* pg. 4). In the context of learning to read and write, children benefit from approaching tasks from various points. Teachers and tutors alike can use different strategies to read with children, model literate behaviors, and encourage them to read.

- ***Put it to use!*** Jot down a list of the ways that you read or otherwise work with the child you tutor. How can you adapt or create new activities to offer her a different approach? Listed below are the seven intelligences. Brainstorm ideas with other tutors or teachers to incorporate activities that give a child ways of responding to or extending a story that are not only verbal:
    - *Linguistic:* Word plays, crossword puzzles, and other games in addition to reading, writing, and telling stories—be careful not sacrifice reading and literacy activities to games that simply keep a child busy!
    - *Logical-Mathematical:* Patterns, riddles, mysteries, and strategy games and stories
    - *Bodily-Kinesthetic:* Dancing, crafts, plays, drawing, and other hands-on activities
    - *Spatial:* Mazes, puzzles, drawing, painting, building
    - *Musical:* Singing, poetry, playing instruments, listening and thinking about sounds and rhythm
    - *Interpersonal:* Reading aloud, working with other children, communicating how others feel
    - *Intrapersonal:* Independent reading, working one-on-one, drawing, and other self-exploring activities

12. ***Children need the opportunity to read, read, read.***

- ***The research says:*** It's really quite simple: the more children read, the better they get at it. The more opportunities they have to engage in reading, the more children will pursue reading on their own. The more interest shown by older children and adults in reading, the more a younger child will develop the skills and interests of an independent reader.

- ***Put it to use!*** Involve parents in your tutoring by linking a parent's work with the child's reading and writing. Have the child "interview" a parent to find out what kinds of reading and writing he or she does every day. The child and parent can do the inventory activity in number 10, identifying the tools of literacy found either at home or at the parent's work-place. Have a *Parents' Day* and let the children give tours explaining the literacy wall and their other posted work.

13. ***Monitoring the development of reading processes is vital to student success.***

- ***The research says:*** Standardized tests and other forms of assessment help chart a child's progress in learning to read and write. Alternative forms of assessment are useful in showing knowledge and progress sometimes not measured by tests. Portfolios are collections of student work that show knowledge and skill development over time. In tutoring, portfolios give the tutor and child a way of sharing their work and show the child's reading development over time.

- ***Put it to use!*** Create a portfolio of the child's work. Meet with his teacher beforehand to discuss the kinds of materials to include and to determine the uses of the portfolio. Include drawings, lists of books the child has read, lists of sight words, photos, tape-recordings of the child reading aloud, and many other items. Also consider keeping a journal to record the literacy activities you pursue with the child. Keep anecdotal records of the books he reads, his abilities, progress, and needs.

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Terms to Know

Like other fields, literacy has its own language of specialized terms and concepts that can be confusing to the lay person. Here's an initial list of words you might encounter if you're helping a child learn to read and write.

Big Book: Enlarged version of a popular picture book that children can easily see and then talk about the text and pictures.

Decode: To use letter-sound correspondence to figure out new or unfamiliar words in a text.

Directionality: A concept of print. For example, that English books are read from front to back. That print goes from left to right and from the top of the page to the bottom.

Dramatic Play: A means children can use to understand or interpret a story or book by acting out the action, either with each other or with toys and props.

High-Frequency Words: Words that appear often in books, including *the, and, be, are*.

Invented Spelling: A system used by young children to write words by using some of the sounds heard in spoken words. Correct spelling is not emphasized. Rather, children are encouraged to write an approximation of the word as it is heard or spoken.

Multiple Intelligences: A concept most associated with Howard Gardner, a Harvard psychologist and researcher, who coined the term to describe various ways that people know and respond to the world. This notion broadens the way we think about knowing, being, and what it means to be intelligent.

Phonemic Awareness: Recognizing the smallest units of sound that make up spoken language.

Sight Words: High-frequency words that cannot be "decoded" through use of phonics, but must be memorized, i.e., *right, through, said*.

Some of these definitions are adapted from *On the Road to Reading: A Guide for Community Partners* (1997), Derry Koralek and Ray Collins and prepared for the Corporation for National Service and the America Reads Challenge.